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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 003292

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SUBJECT: NIGER: FRENCH VIEWS OF AREVA EXPULSION CASE

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Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, 1.4 (b/d  
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11. (C) SUMMARY: The expulsion of AREVA executive Dominique Pin from Niger on July 26 represented the identification of a scapegoat for Niger's lack of success in quelling MNJ rebel elements and a settling of "personal scores," according to MFA Niger Desk Officer Michael Deslaimes. The July 30 visit of Niger Foreign minister Aichatou Mindaoudou was centered almost exclusively on the AREVA case, despite press reporting and anodyne GOF statements to the contrary. Soon after Mindaoudou's visit, France and Niger entered into the first of two agreements that would restore some "normalcy" to relations and to AREVA's presence in Niger. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) Along with visiting Embassy Bangui Pol/Econ/Conoff Cameron McGlothlin, we met on August 1 with Michael Deslaimes, MFA desk officer for Niger. The meeting was intended to introduce McGlothlin to Deslaimes, who will soon become DCM in Bangui, but the discussion quickly centered on the AREVA case (reftel).

13. (C) Deslaimes said that expelled AREVA executive Dominique Pin had found himself "between a rock and a hard place." Deslaimes noted AREVA's long presence in Niger and the prominent role it played as a large foreign operator in a poor country, which allowed it to wield considerable economic and political clout, albeit as a private sector entity. He said that in many ways, AREVA was "the face of France" to many Nigeriens, just as "the United Fruit Company had been the face of the U.S. in many parts of Latin America." Deslaimes did not directly state or directly imply that AREVA had had dealings with the MNJ or other rebel elements, but he indirectly indicated that AREVA, as a powerful entity with long experience in Niger, knew what it had to do in order to keep functioning on a sound basis. (He added that, unlike the situation with the USG and U.S. companies, the GOF did not actively use French companies to further its foreign policy objectives, a point that we declined to debate in the interest of maintaining the focus of the exchange.)

14. (C) Problems had arisen, Deslaimes asserted, because of Niger's inability to counter the MNJ and northern rebel groups, and a series of "defeats" had become a humiliation for Niger, which then had to find a scapegoat for its failures. Deslaimes claimed that the Nigeriens found two such scapegoats -- Libya, for its alleged support of the rebel elements, and AREVA, for its alleged cooperation with the rebels as a cost of doing business. Deslaimes added that

Pin's expulsion also probably represented a "settling of scores" between him and certain Nigeriens whom he may have alienated during his stay in Niger (a theme that Deslaimes did not further elaborate). Pin therefore was expelled. Because AREVA "is the face of France in Niger," the matter quickly became a bilateral problem for France and Niger.

¶5. (C) Deslaimes said that Niger Foreign Minister Mindaoudou's quickly scheduled visit to Paris on July 30 was in fact centered almost exclusively on the AREVA affair, anodyne press reports and GOF and GON statements to the contrary. He indicated that both sides wanted to clear the air over this matter and so the visit was rushed into place despite the ill-will generated by Pin's expulsion.

¶6. (C) On July 30, Mindaoudou lunched with members of AREVA's Paris HQ, which was her original objective for coming to France. After that meeting, Mindaoudou met with French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, again to discuss the AREVA case. Soon after the Kouchner meeting, Deslaimes said that President Sarkozy intervened by telephoning Niger's President Tandja in an effort to put AREVA's operations on a normal footing. Asked whether Sarkozy's message was a "tough" one, Deslaimes said that if Sarkozy used the talking points the MFA had prepared, he did not mince words, although Deslaimes added that Sarkozy of course would have put a pleasant diplomatic gloss on the message.

¶7. (C) Indicating that both sides were moving past the AREVA incident, Deslaimes said that a few hours before his meeting with us on August 1, France and Niger signed a preliminary accord relating to AREVA. This would not, he said, completely "normalize" the situation. A second accord, now in preparation, would accomplish that, and Deslaimes said he thought this second agreement would be on the table in relatively short order.

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¶8. (C) As a further indication of goodwill, State Secretary for Cooperation and Francophonie Jean-Marie Bockel would soon travel to Niger, Deslaimes said. MFA AF PDAS Caroline Dumas, in a separate conversation on August 3, confirmed that Bockel would travel to Niger the evening of August 3, arriving in Niamey on August 4.

¶9. (C) COMMENT: Deslaimes's blunt description of the AREVA matter stands in contrast to the scrupulously evasive language used by MFA spokespersons during the daily briefings following the expulsion, which would leave one with the notion that the AREVA case hardly figured in FM Mindaoudou's visit. Even discounting Deslaimes's tendency to use colorful terms and images during any conversation, one has the impression that after expelling Pin, the Nigeriens quickly realized that they had to engage in damage control both with AREVA and with the GOF, with the latter not reluctant to employ a firm tone in order to get things back on track. END COMMENT.

¶10. (C) Portions of the conversation with Deslaimes concerning the C.A.R. will be reported by septel from Embassy Bangui.

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